

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Church Really Does Matter

June 29, 1997

John M. Buchanan

Gracious God, we pray for your holy catholic church. Fill it with all truth in all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. Amen.

William Laud (1573-1645)

Book of Common Worship

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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John M. Buchanan
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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:2
"To the church of God ... called to be saints"

In the year 55 A.D., 1,942 years ago, there were scattered throughout the cities of the Mediterranean basin, small communities of people so tiny nobody even noticed them. They had lately begun to use the name "Christians" to describe themselves. Their leader was Jesus, a Jew from Nazareth in Palestine, who they had come to believe was God's special representative – God's anointed Messiah. "Christ" – in Greek, so they called themselves Christians.

The little communities existed because a man by the name of Paul had traveled from city to city, telling about this Jesus. He was energetic, bright, eloquent, persuasive. People listened as he talked about Jesus. People believed. People responded to a new word about God and God's love. Those people Paul called "church."

They were very much like you and me. Some believed passionately – some were diffident. They argued – a lot. And Paul, their founder, kept encouraging, urging them to hold on to one another. "To the church, called to be saints," he wrote to one group in Corinth in 55 A.D. Church matters, he told them, over and over. God's plan, God's will, God's love, is yours to enjoy and to share with the world.

Church matters.

Two years ago, after a lot of thinking, arguing with myself, talking to my family and best friends, and praying, I decided to run for Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). And the reason I did was, simply, my conviction that church matters. One year ago, I began my term as Moderator and two weeks ago I handed the gavel to our new Moderator, Patricia Brown, a wonderful Presbyterian Elder from Cincinnati. It was an amazing experience. I traveled almost every day all over the country, preached in a different pulpit each Sunday: National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C., Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, Knox Church, Los Angeles, and through interpreters at Fortaleza, Brazil, Seoul, Korea, Cabaiguan, Cuba, Vinkovci, Croatia. I visited 72 presbyteries and eleven seminaries.

And as I begin to process my experience – what I have seen and done in this extraordinary year, my preliminary conclusion is that the church really does matter. I know it even more deeply now. Every day for a year, I have felt and expressed my gratitude to God for the church, the holy catholic church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and always, the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago.

Let me tell you a little of what I saw.

At our best, we Presbyterians have a twinkle in our eye. It's theological for us. We know about grace, we know that none of us deserves to get into the kingdom but we're in because God has invited us in – so there is an element of joyful playfulness at the heart of the enterprise at our best.

At San Rafael, California, Norm Pott used me as a prop in his children's sermon. He told about the Moderator's cross and invited the children to give the Moderator a "high five" and then not wash their hands for the rest of the day.

Fairlington Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, invited me to preach for the church's 50th Anniversary. Now the Moderator receives many more Sunday invitations than he/she can accommodate, so difficult decisions must be made. Sometimes the invitations are creative, in order to influence the decision-making process. Fairlington's, for instance, was three pages long, and said, "Mr. Moderator, believing like you do that 'church matters,' we the congregation of the Fairlington Presbyterian Church hope and pray you will honor our request and come and speak to our congregation."

Attached was a petition signed by 108 members of the church. Well, who could resist that? So I went in May. Jan Edmiston and Fred Lyons are co-pastors and as Jan was introducing me in worship, she said, "Mr. Moderator, we have a confession to make. You know the petition with all the names on it? Well, if you looked closely, you'll see that the handwriting is very similar for many of them. After we sent it, I was looking at a copy of it and I noticed that. I noticed that there were names on that list of people I know were out of town on the Sunday we passed it around. And then I noticed names of people who use to be members but have moved. And then I noticed the names of a few members of Fairlington Presbyterian Church whose funerals I've had recently. I was horrified. I called the Elder in charge and she said, 'yes, as a matter of fact, we didn't get many signatures, so the committee signed for the people we thought might like a Moderator visit. Same for the ones who died. We chose the ones we thought might like it. Besides, the Moderator's from Chicago; he'll understand that. That's how they elect aldermen, isn't it?'"

We are an old church. We have congregations still worshipping that are 325 years old, and during the year, it was my privilege to preach at anniversaries – 200th, 225th, 250th, 275th.

We are a big church. The Southern Baptists get most of the press for, of all things, taking on Disney, but we have 2.7 million adult members and maybe twice that many adherents. We have 11,400 congregations in this country and 68 colleges and universities that are related to our church. We have a General Assembly mission program in this country and abroad that spends 120 million dollars per year and we have a General Assembly staff of 500 located in the Presbyterian Center in Louisville, Kentucky.

We're old and we are a distinguished missionary church. A century and a half ago, Presbyterian missionaries began to respond to the mandate of Jesus Christ to go into all the world with the Gospel. And they went, not only with good news of God's reign, but a balanced Reformed passion for justice and fullness of life and everywhere they went, they started hospitals and clinics

and medical schools and elementary schools and high schools and colleges. The results are amazing.

There are more Presbyterians in Kenya than there are in the U.S. One of the fastest growing churches in the world is the Presbyterian Church of Sudan.

Much of the surviving healthcare system in the new Republic of the Congo comes from Presbyterian hospitals and medical schools.

The Presbyterian Reformed Church of Cuba, which I visited, is bursting with new life and energy and new members.

The Presbyterian Church of Korea, where Presbyterian missionaries and doctors arrived in 1888, is the dominant religious force in the country. Major hospitals, elementary schools, universities and graduate schools are clearly and intentionally Presbyterian. On Sunday, April 27, I preached in the Choong Shin Presbyterian Church, Seoul, where the Moderator of the Korean Presbyterian Church, Reverend Choongsoon Park, is the pastor. The preacher removes his shoes before entering the chancel. There was a full orchestra, a huge choir, a crowded sanctuary. I preached at the third of five Sunday services – each with a different orchestra and choir.

Korean Presbyterians are intense and intentional. Some congregations have 20,000, 30,000, 40,000 members.

Church life in Korea includes daily prayer meetings held before work, typically at 5:30, 6:30 and 7:30 a.m. We visited two. The sanctuary is full for all services. People bring their Bibles, hear a full sermon and the prayers are offered out loud, each worshipper praying audibly. Koreans love it when we tell them that American Presbyterians don't start believing in God until after 8:30. Our second prayer meeting visit was some distance by bus from where we were staying. In order to be in our seats for the 5:30 service, we had to get up before 4:00 a.m. As we sat in our pew at 5:20, the woman beside me, who happened to be my wife and with whom I had not yet spoken, put her hand on my arm and whispered in my ear, "You owe me big time."

We visited the Demilitarized Zone at the 38th Parallel and were shown one of the several tunnels the North Koreans have dug beneath the DMZ, perhaps as many as 20 – to assist with supplies and troops for the invasion of the South, which many still believe is inevitable. On the North side of the 38th Parallel is one of the largest and best equipped armies in the world. It's government is isolated, bankrupt and paranoid. The South Korean Army, supported by 50,000 American troops, waits anxiously. The enormous population center of Seoul is 35 miles from the DMZ – a modest mortar shot, an easy missile lob. South Korean Presbyterians are clear in their commitment to help feed the people of the North and helped us understand that a bankrupt and hungry North Korea could conclude that there is nothing to lose and much to gain by a massive, almost suicidal invasion.

But there is another fact about North Korea that is little known. There are 500 Presbyterian churches in North Korea, all but two of them without their church buildings. But they are there,

meeting in homes, secretly. We know they are there because the North Koreans allow representatives of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) into the country to visit and on occasion, to bring food and medical supplies. Insik Kim, an employee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is our Coordinator for Eastern Asian Mission. He is a North Korean and he brings our encouragement and prayers and love to brothers and sisters in North Korea for whom the Presbyterian Church is perhaps the only link to the world. If there is hope anywhere for a just and peaceful reunification of Korea, I have come to believe it is in the existence of these 500 Presbyterian congregations. The church matters.

One of the most powerful experiences we had was in Croatia, bringing the greetings and encouragement of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to the Croatian Reformed Church struggling to be faithful and helpful in a part of the world deeply and profoundly divided ethnically and religiously. In Ocijek, a wonderful old city that was hit by 800,000 mortar shells and bombs because it is located on the contested border with Serbia, we stayed in a hotel that still had shrapnel holes in the facade. We visited mission workers, Michele and Steve Kurtz, from the Presbytery of Chicago – Skokie – who are teaching on the faculty of the Evangelical Theology Seminary of Osijek. We visited a refugee feeding program funded by the One Great Hour of Sharing of our church. The refugees are Bosnian Muslims who were driven out of their villages by Serbian forces who either leveled the buildings or moved Serbian families into the homes formerly occupied by Muslims. The men and boys frequently were put in concentration camps or executed. Bosnian Muslim refugees in Croatia are mostly old men and women and children. They bring whatever container they have – pots, cans, jars, a scrub bucket, and they are given soup and a loaf of bread. I took my place behind the counter and ladled soup for awhile, a little self-consciously, as photographers took pictures. On the way out, a Muslim woman, waiting her turn in line, asked who we were. Our translator told her we were American Christians from the Presbyterian Church and that our church had provided this center and this food. She took my hands in hers and through the interpreter said, “Tell him my husband and son were killed; my home was destroyed. I have nothing left. Tell him without the food, we would starve. Tell him I said God bless him.”

That Sunday, the Sunday after Easter, I was invited to preach at the Reformed Church of Vinkovsci, another Croatian city that had sustained severe damage in the bombardment. The little Reformed Church had taken a direct hit: fortunately, no one was killed because most of the people of Vinkovsci had evacuated. But now they’re back and a grant from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has enabled them to repair their church and they had invited the Moderator to worship with them and to receive their thanks. So there I was, one week after standing here in this pulpit, safe, secure, in the midst of the comfortable affluence we take so for granted – standing in a tiny church, freshly plastered and painted, behind a rough communion table with a bunch of wild flowers in a vase and a single cup of wine and loaf of bread, preaching to 100 Croatian men, women and children packed into the tiny sanctuary – preaching about the hope of Easter and the resurrection of Jesus – to people who had experienced the power of resurrection hope in the renewal of their precious church. The pastor, in Croatia, personally serves the bread and wine to each worshipper, and as I broke off a piece of bread and placed it in the outstretched hands and said in English, “The body of Christ for you,” and saw tears of gratitude, I was never more grateful for the church..

These are important days for the church in our country. Our best thinkers are trying to figure out if the mainline church is actually mainline any longer, whether we have been eclipsed by neo-evangelicals and mega-churches who sometimes sound as if they are the sole recipients of the Gospel and that they just invented the church last week: whether we are in the post-denominational age, or the post-Christian age. And as we deal with all of that, we Presbyterians and Methodists and Lutherans and Episcopalians, and United Church of Christ, keep talking about, arguing, fussing with one another about human sexuality and what constitutes responsible, sexual behavior. In fact, because our culture is so utterly obsessed with sexuality – parading it on underwear ads on the side of CTA busses, on billboards on the Kennedy Expressway, using it to sell beer, lawn mowers and Caribbean cruises, inquiring into the intimate behavior of our president – because of all of that, sex is what the world wants to hear us talk about and see us fight about. The Moderator talks to a lot of newspaper reporters – in almost every city and country. No one ever asked me about how we feed the hungry, house the homeless, rebuild burned churches, educate the young, heal the sick. No one failed to ask whether or not we will ordain homosexual persons and how bad it will be.

The topic is important. It defines who we are on a number of fronts, but it is not the sole priority of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Last year we decided that the only persons who could be ordained in our church were those who lived in “faithfulness in heterosexual marriage or chastity in singleness.” I did not approve or agree, but I presided at the meeting of the General Assembly that adopted it. We amended our constitution to that effect. And immediately, many Presbyterians began to dissent on the basis of their understanding of scripture and the Presbyterian Church’s traditional respect for the individual conscience. I’ve been talking about it to unhappy Presbyterians on both sides of the issue for a year.

Two weeks ago a new General Assembly softened our position considerably by replacing “fidelity and chastity” with “faithfulness and integrity in marriage and all life’s relationships.” I am personally much more comfortable with that and I will work as hard as I can to see that our presbyteries ratify it.

And in the meantime, I will conduct my own ministry, as I always have, trying to express the inclusive grace of God in Jesus Christ and hoping that in church we can expect responsible, compassionate, just and faithful behavior from one another in all of life’s relationships and not excluding from full participation in the life of the church, anyone on the isolated basis of sexual orientation.

The church matters – to people in Cuba and North Korea and Brazil and Croatia. Church matters to the Elders of seven Navajo congregations who drove to Ganado, Arizona to meet the Moderator of their church. Church matters to congregations – 11,400 of them in this family – from coast to coast, Manhattan to San Diego, Seattle to Miami.

The church matters to families of infants who will be baptized and welcomed into the household of faith this week, and to families of dear ones whose lives were celebrated in the family of faith and whose eternal safety in God's love was affirmed. And church matters to the hundreds of thousands of Presbyterians today in the midst of their busy, hurried lives, their struggles, fears, worries about job and future, who are hearing again that they are not alone, that their lives count, that God is in life with them and for them and that in Jesus Christ nothing can ever separate them from God's love.

Church matters to the marginalized who will find in Presbyterian churches that they are welcome and affirmed and treated with respect and dignity. Church matters to couples who will make brave promises to one another and to God on Saturday afternoon.

Pray for the church because it matters. If you are a member of this church, if you belong to another church, pray for it, support it, love it. And if you are not a member of a church, join us. Become part of an enterprise that has been around for almost 2,000 years. Become part of an enterprise founded on the ideas, ideals and love of Jesus – an enterprise planted deeply in our history by a man who wrote, "To the church, called to be saints."

The church matters.

Thanks be to God.